



**Denali Commission  
Quarterly Progress Report  
October 1 – December 31, 2020**

SWAMC Staff: Shirley Marquardt, Executive Director; Laura Vaught, Economic Development Specialist

Project Status: The project is on schedule, on budget, and has not experienced any problems to date, other than impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE**

### **Rural Broadband**

SWAMC signed a contract with Alaska Tribal Broadband (ATB) to provide planning and technical support to both tribes and non-tribal entities in the SWAMC region to prepare for and seize upcoming broadband opportunities by taking advantage of the tribal 2.5 GHz spectrum asset and the planned upgrades to new middle mile infrastructure expected to be available in mid-2021. The Plan's primary objective is to position the communities to utilize the tribal 2.5 GHz spectrum as the broadband asset core of the last mile, and to interconnect that last mile with the appropriate planned upgrade middle mile, either fiber or satellite. ATB has begun work immediately and plans to be completed by the end of May 2021. ATB's scope of work is intended to position each community to apply for federal broadband infrastructure funding by being "shovel ready". To attain that readiness, the communities need to have a technical and operating plan, along with required capital and expense budgets, in place. ATB's objective is to provide each community with a "Broadband-in-a-Box Plan" that defines the network, customer premises equipment, and supporting infrastructure it will need to deploy for the last mile network, and for network integration with the best middle mile alternative that will be available for each community. The Plan will include operations support recommendations, capital and expense budgets, and will identify potential sources of funding.

SWAMC is also developing the agenda for our 2021 Economic Summit and Membership Meeting, which will be held virtually in early March, and we plan to include a panel of speakers to address broadband developments in the region.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

### **Alaska Marine Highway System**

Marquardt continued to attend the bi-weekly Reshaping Team Zoom sessions to advocate in person and in writing for the AMHS being funded to provide basic service while the Governor's Reshaping Team analyzed the system's failings while evaluating options for service. The AMHS Reshaping Work Group Final Report was released October 22, 2020 and made strong recommendations to stabilize an aging fleet, increase reliability of service and reduce operating costs by offering private partnerships for onboard services as much as practical. Governor Dunleavy's mid-December budget release took the importance of the system into favor by not cutting from the AMHS budget again this fiscal year. The Aleutian Chain run

was funded at the level of the 2019 budget and provides a single monthly trip from Kodiak to Unalaska/Dutch Harbor May through September. The AMHS is a vital economic connector in the SWAMC region for municipalities, fisheries participants, construction companies, and businesses, and its sustainability is of great importance in our region. Marquardt has also continued to work with Representative Stutes and Edgmon regarding the funding and construction of the Tustumena using federal funds with minimal matching state funds. The new Alaska Class Ferry (no longer simply the Tustumena II) may be used on routes other than the seasonal Chain run but should still be there to provide a basic level of service during the summer months. This will be an administrative change if it occurs.

### **Air Transportation**

Marquardt was named to the advisory body of the new ADOT Unalaska Airport Plan Team and has been attending virtual meetings since October 2020. No new airport/runway will be analyzed in the updated plan, just improvements to safety and ideal aircraft identification for the future. There is no plan to return to jet service in the region other than the Alaska Air 737 Combi flying Anchorage to Cold Bay to pick up passengers from Grant Air. The company replacing Ravn started conducting training flights into Unalaska Oct 7<sup>th</sup> and in mid-November started regularly scheduled service into Unalaska for the first time since early 2019. Marquardt continues to stay in regular contact with Alaska Airlines and its new aircraft service to King Salmon during the winter months.

## **ENERGY**

Work is underway on the third round of the USDA REDA grant to provide subsidized energy audits to businesses statewide. The goal of this program is to help business owners obtain an energy audit and access funding to install energy efficiency upgrades identified in the audit. Many fishing vessel owners have participated in the program in order to upgrade to refrigerated seawater (RSW) systems to chill their catch. This simple yet critical step allows the fisherman to get top dollar for their salmon at delivery. The latest stats for the program are 74 audits completed, 5 in progress, and 27 USDA REAP awards secured by business owners to complete the energy efficiency upgrades identified in their audit. Over \$300,000 has been awarded to business owners to date as a result of SWAMC's program feeding business owners into USDA's REAP grant program. Denali Commission funding is being used to help support this energy audit program by providing non-Federal match.

## **RESOURCES**

### **Mariculture**

SWAMC has worked with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL) on a Department of Energy, Advanced Manufacturing Office-funded grant to investigate uses of kelp and seaweed to make various products, including fuel. The project aims to develop viable solutions to processing bottlenecks holding back expansion of kelp production, identifying processes to be conducted in Alaska to produce various products and identify the market potential of those products. PNNL is managing the grant and SWAMC is providing match and managing a Steering Committee made up of stakeholders from the SWAMC region.

SWAMC has continued to host bi-monthly videoconferences with PNNL and advise them through the end of 2020. The Steering Committee provides local input and some SC members provide kelp samples for PNNL and partners to process and analyze in their lab. Three videoconferences were held during the October-December quarter. SWAMC also helped PNNL plan for a webinar held on October 20 with representatives from DOE on *Energy and Coproducts Originating from Alaskan Sustainable Kelp (ECO-ASK)*. The webinar included participation from SWAMC, Denali Commission, AFDF, UAF, and multiple Alaska kelp companies.

Mariculture was included as part of the scope for the supplemental funding that SWAMC was awarded from EDA as part of the CARES Act. SWAMC staff met with partners Riley Smith of AFDF and Chris Sannito of Alaska Sea Grant in the fall to develop a scope for this work, ensuring that SWAMC addresses both EDA's funding direction to focus on resiliency for the region and helps fill a need in the industry. The scope of this new project will include 3 objectives: 1. Seaweed Product Development; 2. Seaweed Processing Pilot Project; and 3. Outreach & Information Sharing. Scope development has taken longer than anticipated but SWAMC expects to have something from our partners by the end of January.

SWAMC is also developing the agenda for our 2021 Economic Summit and Membership Meeting, which will be held virtually in early March, and we plan to include a panel of speakers to address mariculture developments in the region.

## **WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

### **AmeriCorps VISTA and the Alaska Maritime Workforce Development Plan**

AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer Brooks Duncan continued updating the Alaska Career Information Service database. He added more maritime-specific occupational information, including mariculture into the current database. Brooks continued to create and deploy new career awareness and exploration content but has been held back from attending job fairs by the pandemic. He further narrowed the scope of the top 5 occupation clusters that the project will focus on in the last three months and this will push the jobs with the most priority to the front and allow for the jobs that are most in demand to be more easily filled.

The fisheries industry continues to support this project in varying degrees of engagement and feedback. The hope for 2021 is that Brooks can make site visits in fisheries-dependent communities throughout southwest Alaska and meet with processors, marine pilots, educators, and tribal organizations. This missing piece of the process to update the database is important.

Due to COVID-19, communication has been a challenge and we saw success with Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and email. Brooks is still in connection with 'TotalView' and is working to incorporate VR and 3D technology in the course work. This portion of the project has a way to go before they design the pilot/draft virtual reality training program, and the ability to meet with stakeholders in person is a critical element to its success.

## **BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE**

Since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, staff has been busy working with stakeholders in our region including businesses and municipalities to access CARES Act funds. SWAMC has provided an online financial assistance tool called FORWARD to connect business owners in our region to federal, state, and local funding programs, both CARES Act programs and broader, to help businesses weather the economic impacts of COVID-19. We also had a consultant on-call through the end of December to answer phone calls and emails from business owners needing assistance with FORWARD, with specific grant programs, or with understanding where to start. Many CARES Act programs are now fully subscribed, but some funding programs, like the \$50 million in CARES Act fisheries assistance, have yet to open, so we expect our assistance to businesses to stretch into spring.

SWAMC staff has been participating in weekly ECHO teleconferences to stay up to date with vaccine news and planning. Marquardt has been sharing information with SWAMC's Board of Directors and collecting needs and challenges from the region to share with legislators and other leadership as appropriate to find solutions. COVID impacts across the region and the vaccine rollout will be a major focus at SWAMC's 2021 Economic Summit and Membership Meeting.

SWAMC staff spent time reviewing the FEMA Recovery Planning Guide for Local Governments in preparation to draft an RFP for a contractor to help us develop a Regional Economic Recovery and Resiliency Plan, a primary objective under our EDA Supplemental grant. This planning process will include a lot of outreach to regional stakeholders and surveying of their impacts from the pandemic and lessons learned. That RFP has been finalized and released to the public.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

### **ARDORs/Economic Development Organizations**

SWAMC staff has developed a much stronger relationship with the other ARDORs and statewide economic development organizations through regular participation in videoconferences hosted by DCCED (weekly ARDOR call) and Nolan Klouda of UAA Center for Economic Development (monthly economic developers call). These regular calls have proven to be immensely valuable to learn from others doing similar work, share successes and challenges, give and receive feedback, and better understand initiatives in other parts of the state and the individuals behind them. The DCCED calls are being held for the ARDORs who received state CARES funding to help businesses access COVID-19 relief funds, and the economic developers call has been held since early April in response to the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic. Jon Bittner of the Alaska Small Business Development Center in Anchorage continues to be an exceptionally valuable team member and a good partner with SWAMC.